

The Post-divorce American Family

An intergenerational perspective

About three decades ago, a new family form became prominent in America – the post-divorce family. **PAUL AMATO** looks at the long-term social and economic outcomes for children of divorced families as they enter into adulthood.



This is an edited version of a paper presented during the Institute's Fifth Australian Family Research Conference in Brisbane, in November 1996.

Divorce has become normative in American society, in that the majority of all marriages end this way. In the 1940s, following World War II, a sharp increase in the number of divorces occurred, followed by a sharp decline. The divorce rate was flat during the 1950s and 1960s, shot up dramatically during the late 1960s and 1970s, and levelled off in the 1980s at an historically high level.

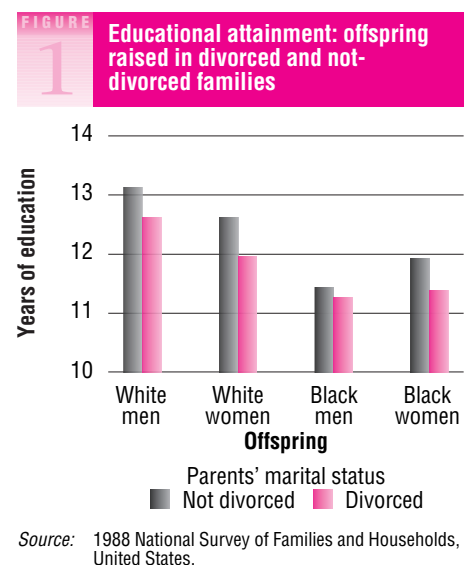
Currently, at least one-half of all first marriages in the United States are projected to end in divorce, and the rates of divorce for second and third marriages are even higher. Similar trends are apparent in other western, industrialised countries including Australia, where about one-third of all first marriages end in divorce.

This trend has affected the lives of large numbers of children. In the United States, over one million children experience divorce each year and nearly half of all children will experience divorce at some point during childhood. In Australia, this latter figure is about one child in five. This means that increasing numbers of children in both the United States and Australia are growing up in post-divorce families.

This trend is a concern to many people. In the United States, Conservatives believe that a two-parent family is necessary for the successful socialisation of children. They view divorce and single-parent families as being the root cause of most of our social problems including school failure, crime, substance abuse and poverty. Conservatives see the high rate of divorce, therefore, as a threat not only to the wellbeing of individual children, but to the wellbeing of the nation which will one day depend on these children.

Non-traditionalists, in contrast, believe that family structure is not very important in the larger scheme of things. They believe that most children are resilient, adjust well to change, and are better off when unhappy parents divorce. Poverty, neglect and abuse, and lack of government services for children, they argue, are much more serious problems than divorce.

The social science data, however, indicate that both of these views are wrong. In contrast to the conservative view, divorce is not a monolithic event that inevitably damages children and destines them to unproductive lives. However, neither is divorce a trivial, benign event that most children greet with equanimity and readily adjust to – the view embraced by the non-traditionalists. The truth lies



somewhere between these pessimistic and optimistic scenarios.

This article looks at how divorce affects children's lives, with particular focus on the long-term consequences for young people of divorced families when they reach adulthood. Four types of long-term outcome are briefly described: socio-economic attainment; relationships with spouses; relationships with parents; and personal wellbeing.

Life Course Theory

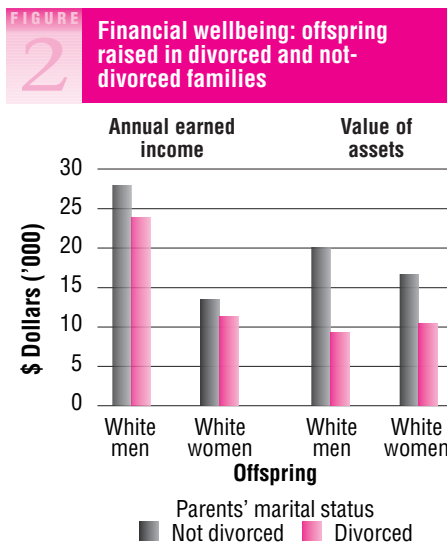
A key theoretical orientation that has emerged in family studies is a 'life course' perspective, which emphasises the interdependence of parents' and children's lives over time. This perspective stresses the timing and sequencing of events over the life course, and holds that people do not passively react to circumstances, but actively make decisions based on their perceptions of the constraints and opportunities available at particular times in their lives.

The circumstances surrounding divorce presents many challenges to children. These challenges include a degree of family conflict prior to and following the divorce, a decline in interaction between children and custodial parents (usually mothers), a decrease in the frequency of contact with non-custodial parents (usually fathers), a decline in economic resources, and other stressful life events including relocating (often to a neighbourhood with poorer schools and fewer services), and parental remarriage (which many children resist). Not all children experience all of these changes, but most children experience at least a few.

As children from divorced families reach late adolescence and early adulthood they react to these circumstances, evaluate their opportunities, and reach decisions. These decisions include living at home or moving out, maintaining or not maintaining contact with parents, staying in school or dropping out, undertaking higher education or seeking employment, marrying early or postponing marriage, cohabiting with a partner, and becoming a parent – perhaps prior to marrying. These interrelated decisions, which are shaped by the circumstances following parental divorce, have consequences that persist throughout the remainder of the life course.

Socio-economic Attainment

How does divorce affect children's socio-economic attainment? In 1991, I co-published an article (Amato and Keith 1991) that addressed this question using data from the National Survey of Families and Households, a national probability sample collected in the United States in 1988. The analysis involved 4722 white adults and 1419 black adults. Life history data allowed the identification of respondents who experienced a parental divorce prior to the age of 19 years.



Source: 1988 National Survey of Families and Households, United States.

Figure 1 shows the mean years of education by whether the respondent's parents divorced. These means are adjusted for respondent's age, parents' education and occupational status. Note that for white men, white women and black women, parental divorce decreases educational attainment by about one-half year. This finding is similar to that found for Australian families in the first wave of the Australian Family Formation Project (1981–91) undertaken by the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

Figure 2 is based on the same sample and shows the implications of parental

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divorce for financial wellbeing in adulthood (here, for white men and women).

The left side of Figure 2 shows annual earned income, while the right side shows the value of assets, defined as the worth of a person's home, other real estate and automobiles, minus what is owed on these items. This figure shows that men and women with divorced parents earn, respectively, nearly \$4000 and \$2000 less per year than those whose parents remain married.

This annual difference adds up over time. The typical male whose parents had not divorced in 1988 had about \$20,000 in equity, while the corresponding value for men with divorced parents was over \$10,000 less. A slightly smaller gap was apparent for women.

These data tell us that children from divorced families, as a group, enter adulthood with fewer educational and financial resources than do other children.

Marital Quality

In 1991, I published with Alan Booth a study examining marital quality among adult children from divorced families

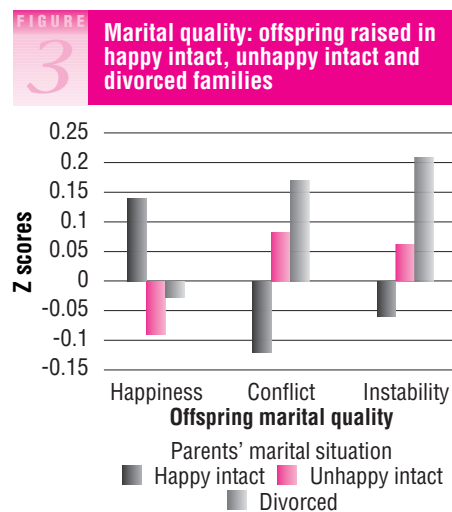
(Amato and Booth 1991). The Study of Marriage Over the Life Course, a national probability sample of over 2000 married adults, asked people questions about their own and their parents' marriages. Respondents were interviewed in 1980 and again in 1983, 1988 and 1992.

Figure 3 deals with marital quality of adult offspring from three groups: those whose parents had happy and intact marriages; those whose parents had unhappy but intact marriages; and those whose parents were divorced. Measures of marital happiness, marital conflict and marital instability of adult offspring are shown. Marital instability refers to the extent to which people think about divorce, talk to others about getting a divorce, and otherwise act in a non-committed manner towards their marriage. Means are adjusted for age, race and gender, as well as for parents' level of education.

The figure shows that adults who grew up in happy intact families reported the highest level of happiness with their own marriages, while those who grew up in unhappy but intact families or whose parents had divorced reported lower levels of marital happiness. A similar pattern appears for conflict and instability. These results suggest that marital quality is transmitted across generations.

Intergenerational Patterns of Divorce

Is divorce also transmitted across generations? Figure 4 shows the percentage of respondents who divorced during the period of the initial study between 1980 and 1992 (see Amato 1996). This figure shows that when neither the husband's nor the wife's parents had divorced, the percentage of adult offspring couples in first marriages who divorced was relatively low – about 10 per cent. However, where the parents of one member or both members of these couples had divorced, the divorce rate was somewhat higher.



Source: Study of Marriage Over the Life Course (1980, 1988, 1992), United States.

Comparable results for those in second or higher-order marriages (second marriages) are also indicated, and show that the divorce rate for remarried couples is relatively high regardless of parental divorce. Nevertheless, the overall pattern is the same. These results indicate that divorce, like marital quality, is transmitted across generations.

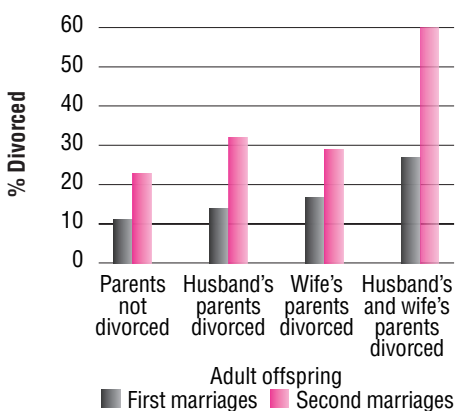
In subsequent analyses, I attempted to explain this phenomenon by considering five possible mechanisms. Adult children with divorced parents may be more likely to see their own marriages end in divorce because they, compared with other children: (1) tend to marry at relatively young ages; (2) are more likely to cohabit prior to marriage; (3) have lower socio-economic attainment; (4) hold more liberal attitudes toward divorce; and (5) are more prone to behave in problematic ways within marriage. Each of these are risk factors for divorce.

To evaluate these explanations, event history models were used, estimated with logistic regression. Although some support for each explanation was found, greatest support occurred for the fifth explanation. That is, people from divorced families of origin tend to exhibit behaviours that undermine the stability of marriage, such as becoming jealous easily, having difficulty controlling anger, and not communicating problems.

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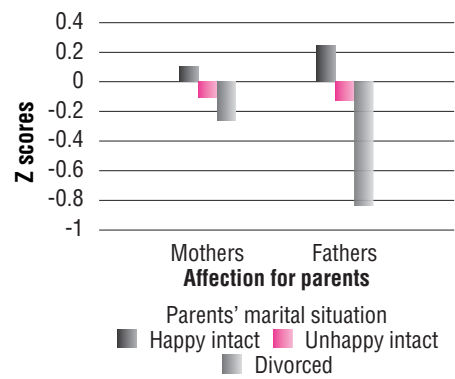
These findings are consistent with the notion that children in divorced families have fewer opportunities to learn interpersonal skills – such as building trust, managing emotions and communicating effectively – that strengthen intimate relationships. Because they have not been exposed to good parental models while growing up, many of these individuals

FIGURE 4 Per cent of adult offspring divorced by parents' marital status, 1980–92



Source: Study of Marriage Over the Life Course (1980, 1983, 1988, 1992), United States.

FIGURE 5 Affection for parents: young adult offspring raised in happy intact, unhappy intact and divorced families



Source: Study of Marriage Over the Life Course (1980, 1983, 1988, 1992), United States.

may enter marriage without an adequate repertoire of interpersonal skills to sustain their marriages.

Parent–Child Relationships After Divorce

What about parent–child relationships? In 1992 data were collected for a study of 471 young adult offspring (aged 19 to 40 years; median age 23) and their parents (see Amato, Rezac and Booth 1995; Booth and Amato 1994).

These young adults were asked questions about their relationship with their parents that dealt with areas such as trust, respect, understanding, fairness and feelings of closeness. From the responses three categories of respondents were created: those who grew up in happy intact families; those who grew up in unhappy but intact families; and those who experienced a parental divorce. To determine whether the parents' marriage was a happy one, the parents of these young adults were then asked a series of questions dealing with satisfaction, conflict and marital problems.

Figure 5 indicates the degree of affection felt by young adult offspring for their parents by parents' marital happiness and divorce. Note that the strongest affection towards parents is exhibited when the parents' marriage is happy and intact; less affection where the parents' marriage is unhappy but intact; and least affection where parents have divorced. While this pattern is true for affection expressed towards both parents (i.e. irrespective of gender), in terms of affection towards fathers, the distinctions are more extreme.

This study suggests that marital discord, and in particular divorce, weakens ties of affection between parents and children. The father–child relationship is especially vulnerable to parental conflict and divorce, with one exception. Divorce did not appear to weaken the ties between sons and fathers, or between daughters and mothers, if it occurred during late adoles-

cence. Presumably, by this point in their development, young adults identify strongly enough with the same-gender parent such that divorce is not damaging to the relationship.

Figure 6 deals with the amount of assistance exchanged between parents and their children. The vertical axis is a summary score that reflects the amount of help exchanged between households, including help with money, transportation, housework, home repairs and emotional support. In this figure, the higher bars indicate greater help given to or received from parents.

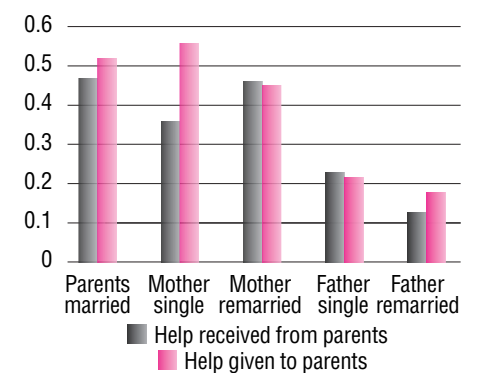
From this figure it is apparent that, compared with offspring whose parents remain married or remarry, those in lone-mother households tend to give relatively high levels of assistance but receive relatively low levels of assistance. This reflects the fact that many single mothers are resource poor.

Help exchanged with fathers, on the other hand, is very low following divorce, regardless of whether fathers have remained single or remarried. This indicates that many fathers cease to be part of their children's support networks following divorce. For example, the study found that most divorced fathers contributed little money to their children's college education; it can be speculated that, as these fathers age, they will receive relatively little assistance from their adult offspring in return.

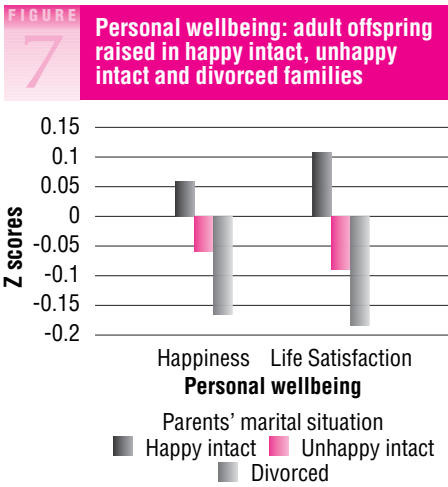
Psychological Wellbeing

Figure 7 shows two outcomes of psychological wellbeing for the above group of 471 young adult offspring: first, self-reported happiness; second, a summary measure of satisfaction with multiple areas of life – such as job, home, neighbourhood and leisure activities. In this figure, a higher score indicates greater happiness and life satisfaction. Note that young adults who grow up in happy intact families have the highest levels of happiness and satisfaction, and those from divorced families have the lowest.

FIGURE 6 Help exchanged with parents by parents' marital status



Source: Study of Marriage Over the Life Course (1980, 1983, 1988, 1992), United States.



Source: Study of Marriage Over the Life Course (1980, 1983, 1988, 1992), United States.

These results suggest that parental conflict and divorce lower children's wellbeing. In other words, even something as subtle as the happiness of young people with their adult lives appears to be affected by the decisions made by their parents in regard to divorce many years earlier.

Conclusions

Interpretation of the data in the various studies described here suggests that the non-traditionalist perspective outlined earlier is incorrect. As a group, offspring from divorced families, compared with those from two-parent families, enter adulthood with less education, earn less money, have fewer financial assets, have poorer quality marriages, are more likely to divorce, have less affection for their parents (especially fathers), exchange less assistance with their fathers, and have lower levels of personal wellbeing.

However, these results need to be put into perspective. The differences between children from divorced and not-divorced families, although statistically significant, are generally modest rather than strong. This means that there is a substantial degree of diversity in outcomes for children of divorced families.

Consider Figure 8. This figure shows the distributions of personal wellbeing scores for individuals with divorced and not-divorced parents. These distributions have been 'smoothed' to appear normal, although any empirical distribution will depart from normality in certain ways. Scores on the left side of each distribution represent a low level of wellbeing, and scores on the right side represent a high level of wellbeing. The height of the curve reflects the frequency of people who score at each level of wellbeing, and vertical lines drawn from the high points in each distribution represent the means.

Note that the mean for those with divorced parents is lower than the mean for those with not-divorced parents. That is, the mean for children from divorced fam-

ilies is shifted to the left. This difference represents about one-fifth of a standard deviation – a typical difference in divorce research.

But note also the substantial overlap in distributions. Many children with not-divorced parents enter adulthood with a level of personal wellbeing *lower* than that of the average child from a divorced family. This group is shown in region 1. Although they grow up in two-parent families, these people experience other stressors, either in the family of origin or later in life, that lead them to be unhappy as adults.

Correspondingly, many children with divorced parents enter adulthood with a level of personal wellbeing *higher* than that of the average child from a two-parent family. This group is shown in region 2 of the figure. Although these children experience divorce, they have other resources in their lives that allow them to develop into relatively happy adults.

The same principle applies to other outcomes. Many children from divorced families graduate from college, have

parent families. Pre-marital education, marriage enrichment programs and marital counselling can play a role in meeting this goal. So can policies that improve the economic wellbeing of two-parent families, especially those that are close to or below the poverty line.

Unfortunately, though, many marriages cannot be salvaged. In the United States, changes to divorce laws have been postulated on the assumption that if divorce is more difficult to obtain, then fewer people will divorce and fewer children will thus be harmed. These changes would see a return to an exclusively fault-based system of divorce and are currently under consideration by several state legislatures. Restricting divorce, however, is unlikely to benefit children and will simply increase the number of couples who opt for a permanent separation and trap more children in high-conflict marriages.

Given that the legal system cannot make parents live together happily, it makes little sense to force parents to remain in marriages against their will. What we *can* do, however, is ease the burden of economic stress that undermines marital quality through the provision of adequate support mechanisms for families in crisis or in need. Similarly, we can encourage workplace policies that

reduce tensions for families as they struggle to balance the often conflicting demands of home and paid work.

Children can best be served by strengthening, rather than limiting, the conditions or circumstances by which their parents live – that is, by creating social and economic conditions under which people want to marry, are happy with their marriages, and wish to stay married.

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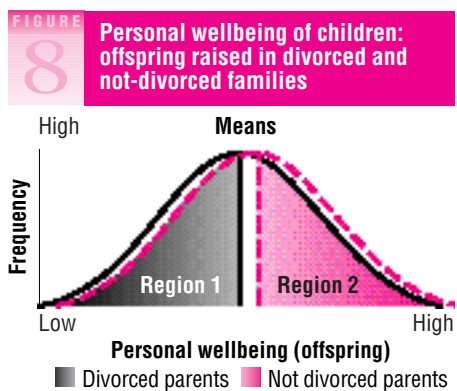
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successful careers, are happily married, and have close ties with mothers and fathers. Correspondingly, many children from two-parent families fail to achieve these goals.

Although divorce increases the risk of a variety of negative outcomes, most children from divorced families reach adulthood as competent, well-adjusted citizens. This suggests that divorce and single-parenthood, although problematic, cannot be the root cause of most of our social problems. The differences are simply not big enough.

Policy Implications

What are some policy implications of this research? The data clearly show that children do best when raised in happy two-



Source: Study of Marriage Over the Life Course (1980, 1983, 1988, 1992), United States.

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